No. 24

The REDEMPTION of Marie Gordon

THE TRAGIC STORY OF WRONGED WOMANHOOD

Price 10¢

Richard Cortenay, the handsome movie star, was coming to ta ke her to dinner. Her heart, once more thirsting for romance instead of money, gave a violent leap.

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THERE was something about Alice's manner of dress, her personality and peculiar attitude that jarred unharmoniously upon Phil's finer sensibilities. Some of the things she had said were revolving in his mind. But the outstanding phrase was the old moth-eaten quotation about absence making the heart grow fonder.

Phil could not repress a cynical smile as he pondered upon these words. They had sounded like a hollow mockery coming from the lips of a woman like Alice.

It seemed that her keen intuition caught the drift of his thoughts, for she broke the momentary silence with:

"Don't you believe that a temporary separation is often the medium of bringing about a better understanding and a fuller appreciation of each other, between a husband and a wife who have drifted apart? Don't you believe that, Phil?"

The latter kept his face averted as he said:

"I don't care to argue that with you now, Alice."

"But why not?"

"Because it would be a waste of breath."

"Oh, is that the way you feel about it?" Alice tossed her head defiantly. "Well, it is alright with me. In a way I am glad that——"

"You may go," Gordon interrupted her with ill-concealed impatience. "I have no doubt that a change of surroundings will do you much good. And you can stay away as long as you like."

A low laugh escaped the woman.

"And you won't miss me?" she asked softly.

"Not at all, Alice."

She studied him for a few seconds, then said in a voice that sounded peculiarly harsh:

"I shall need some money—quite a bit of it. Will

you be kind enough to give me a check for about two thousand?"

The average husband would have demurred at this. The average husband would have questioned his wife's need of such a large sum for a trip such as Alice was about to begin. But Phil never whimpered.

"Whatever you need you can have by drawing upon my account at the First National Bank," he declared.

"Oh, thanks so much," Alice replied sarcastically. "So generous of you, old dear."

She waited for a moment for any rejoinder her husband might care to make. When he remained silent and turned his back deliberately on her, she walked toward the door.

"I don't suppose you care to kiss me goodby, old dear," she exclaimed with the door knob already in her hand.

"No," came back promptly.

"And I don't suppose you would care to drive me to the railroad station," she grinned. "I am taking the noon train for Los Angeles."

"The chauffeur will do that, I believe, if you address yourself to him," Phil said coldly.

"Very well, hubby dear." She gave a mean little chuckle. "Well, so long, then. And don't get lonesome. If you do, send me a wire, and I'll hurry back at once."

Phil Gordon put all the contempt he could gather in the look he gave her.

Alice repaid him in the same coin. She opened the door quickly with a derisive laugh. The next instant she had disappeared. But Philip Gordon could still hear that laugh.

It was not often that he broke out in a flow of profanity. But he did now, for his soul had been sorely tried.

Chapter 76

IN HOLLYWOOD.

FOR ONCE during her married life, Alice Gordon told her husband the truth. She had been invited by Gloria Marsdon, the famous movie star to spend a month at the latter's home in Hollywood. And it was also true that these two had been schoolmates, having finished college together.

On the other hand Philip Gordon was mistaken in his suspicions. His wife intended to make the trip alone.

Neither Willard Parker, her most devoted admirer, nor any other man, was included in Alice's calculations at this time.

The only thing Alice had done without her husband's knowledge, was to make the most elaborate preparations. Various costly gowns had been carefully packed.

Every bit of jewelry worth exhibiting found a secure hiding place in the bottom of one of her trunks.

As a matter of fact Alice had been looking forward to this trip to Hollywood for some time. And she had virtually coaxed an invitation out of Gloria Mardson.

To mingle with the famous film folk had always been one of her most cherished dreams. To meet such handsome men as John Bowers, Tom Meighan and Richard Courteney face to face at a social function was something she had never dreamed of. Alice did not undervalue her own good looks.

She felt quite content to let these men draw comparisons between her and those female screen favorites.

The trip to Los Angeles where Gloria Marsdon had

agreed to meet her, was rather uneventful for Alice Gordon. She enjoyed the scenery along the route. But she had, as a rule, little appreciation for nature's beauties.

The few men who occupied the observation car were old and bald. They gave Alice a casual glance now and then, but there was no sign of attempted flirtation.

For the most part she remained to herself and her anticipations. The train had reached the last lap and was speeding toward Los Angeles.

It was the shrill tone of the engine's whistle as it started downgrade that awoke Alice occasionally from her reverie. Her mind was racing ahead to this visit to Gloria Marsdon.

When the train finally stopped at its destination, Alice rose at once and went out upon the platform. The next instant a pair of soft arms were thrown around her neck, and a pair of lips were pressed to her own.

"Gloria—Gloria!" she exclaimed, delighted. "Oh, how glad I am to see you!"

"The same to you," the movie star laughed as she looked her girlhood chum over carefully. "My," she gasped, "you were always the prettiest girl at college, Alice, but now you are prettier than ever. No self-respecting woman should allow herself to be seen on the street with you."

Mrs. Gordon's cheeks flushed scarlet.

Just then a dark, and very handsome young man dashed up in a smart sport model of expensive make. He called a greeting to Gloria Marsdon, then passed on.

"Who—who was that?" Alice asked breathlessly.

"Richard Courtenay, the actor," was the rather indifferent answer.

"Oh," gasped Alice. "I thought it was him. What a fine looking chap."

"Yes, he is that," agreed Miss Marsdon. "Now let's be off."

Arm in arm the two women moved toward the street where a luxurious closed car stood awaiting them.

Alice was thrilled as they left behind the commercial district of Los Angeles and in a few minutes entered the outskirts of Hollywood. She felt herself lifted in a wave of delight.

Hollywood began to unfold before her eager gaze like the flaming portals of the Arabian Nights. No one has ever explained the exact feeling that this world-famous movie colony gives you, nor the reason for it.

Alice knew its lure on the instant she breathed its perfumed air, mingled orange blossoms and hill brush.

Then there was that fresh tang of the ocean not far distant. The boulevard stretched its paved length before her between trees that lent it an almost fairy-like beauty.

There were even rows of picturesque, one story shops, Spanish in design, plastered in every color of the rainbow, flaunting oriental striped awnings.

She saw two women standing together on the street corner. The one was bareheaded, in a cretonne house apron with a paper shopping bag over her arm. The other was dressed in a fortune of chinchilla and finery.

Handsome men, hatless and in golf stockings or putees sauntered up and down the streets, smoking, chatting and laughing. Already Alice saw that reality had ceased to be. This was — this must be — the home of romance.

"I suppose you are dying to say 'so this is Hollywood' " remarked Gloria Marsdon as she gave her companion a sidelong glance. "Well, go ahead and say it. Hollywood is a funny place. It is not a bit like most

people think.

"It is just a village with the melting pot of the studios hung in the village square. No doubt all the men in Hollywood will fall in love with you, Alice. They haven't seen a complexion like yours in years."

"Oh, men don't fall in love with married women as a rule," Mrs. Gordon replied innocently. "And even if they did, a married woman could not fall in love with them."

Gloria Marsdon raised her penciled eyebrows.

"My dear," she said, "no woman married or single can ever tell when she is going to fall in love, or with whom. There is a certain type of man in this world who has a fairly infallible system. But all women do not meet one. A married woman needs just one prayer. Do you know what that is?"

"No," confessed Alice. "Tell me."

"Lead me not into temptation," laughed the movie star. "You heard that before, didn't you?"

Alice Gordon made a wry face. How long had it been since she uttered the prayer containing these words? For a moment unpleasant memories rushed into her mind, but she banished them quickly.

"Most married women these days don't flee from temptations," Miss Marsdon went on, a peculiar smile curving her roughed lips. "Instead they hunt for it."

"No—no," protested Alice feebly.

"They do," the other woman insisted. "Formerly marriage used to be a sort of a quarantine where every woman was immune from temptation. But it is so different now. Marriage now is merely an excuse."

Mrs. Gordon heartily agreed with this, although she was too shrewd to make known her sentiments at this time.

Yes, she was willing to be tempted. As a matter

of fact she had come to Hollywood to find that thrill. Forgotten was the husband she left at home. Forgotten was every tie that held her to him.

She looked very little like a mother who had buried her baby but a few days ago. The gratification of her vanities was her sole desire. Gloria Marsdon had told her that every man in Hollywood would fall in love with her.

Alice could not repress a smile of deep satisfaction. They might fall in love with her, but she meant to pick her lover.

Presently the car came to a stop in front of a handsome residence of stucco and brick. A profusion of palms and flowers were everywhere. There was a large terrace in the front and a portico on one side. It was just a home where real romance must dwell.

Above Richard Courtenay's desk in his library was a small porcelain tablet, on which a motto was gilded in fantastic letters. It was a motto commendable in the extreme.

And some female visitors who found their way into his bachelordom had changed their opinion of this handsome Romeo of the screen.

"Vanity, vanity, all is vanity!" it read.

Only once had Richard Courtenay confided his exact reason for the selection of that particular bit of scriptural wisdow as his favorite text. And that was to a director whom he admired, and who liked him.

Quite a few men in Hollywood did not like Courtenay. He was not a bad sort except where his life touched

the feminine.

He was a fine actor, he rode well and was an excellent shot. He was a gentleman when drunk and a very cold hand in a poker game.

Nor was he unduly conceited, in spite of his rapid rise to fame and fortune. He seemed inclined to take life with a cynical and amused shrug.

But a man who possesses an irresistible fascination for all women between the ages of six and sixty, whose fan mail includes hundreds of love letters a day from other men's wives, sisters and sweethearts, is not apt to be very popular with the members of his own sex.

The director for whom he worked liked Richard Courtenay, and the latter spoke about his strange motto one day.

"It isn't for myself, that motto," the film star admitted. "It is about women."

"Women?" repeated the other, studying the dark, sullen face before him. "I don't think I quite understand."

Richard Courtenay smiled that flashing, gleaming poignant smile of his, where the lightning of deviltry played through its sweetness.

"It is the absolute and infallible truth about women," he said. "I have discovered about them in—in a bit of experience. With them all is vanity indeed, my friend."

"You mean?" inquired the director.

The shrug that answered was world-renowned. Highschool girls and matrons in sable or calico, stenographers and women of wealth, sitting in darkened theaters from coast to coast, watched its reckless grace and it left an odd, nameless throb about their hearts.

"If you tickle a woman's vanity she becomes your friend for life that instant," the film star declared. "You

can flatter them out of everything they believe."

"That is not a very pleasant philosophy," the other objected.

"But it is not a philosophy," declared Courtenay. "It is a truth."

That ended the discussion of the subject in which neither man was willing to admit defeat.

Now Alice Gordon knew nothing of the motto that hung above Richard Courtenay's desk. All she knew of him was what thousands of other women knew, namely, that he made hearts beat faster, lips sting for kisses. That his winged ardor was their ideal of love over which they had dreamed.

But all of them never stopped to analyze that this handsome screen favorite symbolized passion.

Like all the others of her sex, Alice craved to meet this man and learn to know him more intimately.

On the wonderful summer morning she arrived in Hollywood, all Alice knew was that this was an ideal spot for recreation and enjoyment. What the nature of the enjoyment might be, she did not stop to guess.

After she had been made comfortable and thoroughly at home by Gloria Marsdon, the latter begged to be excused because the activities at the studio called her.

Mrs. Gordon found it delightful to be alone. She idled about the house and then explored the beautiful gardens.

Almost drowsing in its sweetness, she held a mass of roses she had gathered against the delicate laces above her heart, while with the other hand she reached up to sweep aside the graceful branches of a sycamore that blocked her path.

Alice was a wonderful picture to behold among the flowers and shrubbery. She was sheltered from the world by a high wall of bright pink plaster on three sides,

and by a hill on the fourth.

Her thoughts were all of Richard Courtenay, the handsome film star. How long would it be before she had the pleasure of meeting him face to face.

Suddenly a strange feeling took possession of her. She knew she was no longer alone, and yet, no other human being was within sight. Her nerves began to tingle without knowing why.

Then a voice smote her ear. And what an agreeable voice it was, low and musical—a man's voice.

"You can not be real," it said. "You simply can not be of this world. You are a dream, and I shall awaken in but one little moment to find myself gazing into space."

Alice clasped the roses closer so that a thorn or two pierced through her laces.

Wildly she looked about, and then she saw him perched on top of the wall. At the first glance she recognized him. Yes, it was the one man in all the world she wanted to meet.

"Richard Courtenay," she murmured the name softly.

"You speak my name, so you must be real," the screen star answered. "Ah, no dream was ever so fair as you, my lady. May I presume to converse with you?"

"You may," she said, dimpling.

Courtenay leaped from the wall and stood before her, bowing deeply.

He wore white riding clothes that fitted the breadth of his shoulders and the slimness of his waist like a glove. His hair where the sun touched it was black and smooth as lacquer.

The perfection and the polish of his boots, and the way he held his riding crop, had just the touch of swagger to intrigue a woman's fancy in a rose garden.

"You are surprised to see me, are you not?" he asked laughing.

"Of course I am," Alice admitted.

"You are Mrs. Gordon from Chicago, aren't you?" His eyes held hers.

"Yes, but how did you know?"

"Hollywood has many indiscreet birds who whisper in one's ears."

At this Alice burst into a melodious laugh. At once she suspected that Gloria Marsdon had spoken of her coming. She could not feel resentful at that. How could she when this gossip had brought the realization of a cherished dream.

"Don't you know it is bad taste to call on a lady at this hour?" she reproached.

"Perhaps so, but I wanted to be the first one to welcome you, my dear Mrs. Gordon," he replied audaciously. "I had heard about your beauty and was anxious to convince myself of gossip's truth."

"Has gossip lied?" She smiled.

"No, gossip did not tell half, my dear lady."

Again their eyes met, and plunging deep into the pool of each other's laughter, eternity hung suspended in a heartbeat.

Richard Courtenay's eyes grew blacker—eyes already so black they seemed to have no pupil. They were eyes with some magic pull and sway in them, some secret promise. Chained in their depths was a thing unreadable.

"As I told you before," Alice resumed the conversation, "it is bad manners to come calling so early. I am not half awakened."

"Ah, my lady is charming in her sleep, then," he said, and laughed mischievously at the lovely flood of red that mounted to the woman's cheeks. "But I admit I

have bad manners, and yet I am frank enough to say that I am not sorry I intruded."

"But you ought to be, Mr. Courtenay," she pouted prettily. "You must go at once."

"What if I refuse, Mrs. Gordon?"

"You won't refuse when I command," she returned quickly.

"Perhaps I could be bribed."

"Bribed with what, sir?"

"Who can tell? he murmured. "Perhaps a kiss would suffice."

She uttered another laugh at this.

"The price is too high," she told him.

"For an instant departure?" His eyes were clinging to hers in a manner that almost frightened her. "Only one little kiss? Women have paid much more for the gratification of a wish."

Alice did not move as he approached steadily with the devil lurking in those black orbs of his.

Like a flash his arms went up and embraced her. He kissed her, and she was not quite sure but that she returned it. Well, at any rate, it was their first kiss. It had been very sweet and gentle. It could easily be tucked away in the hidden chambers of thought.

But Alice Gordon knew then and there, as she felt the fragrant world swing dizzily, intoxicatingly about her, that as long as she lived she would never forget that kiss.

The next moment she flew up the steps, her draperies flying, and vanished through the door.

Alice looked after him with her face burning and her pulses throbbing. She had not expected that she would come in personal touch with romance.

"What a wonderfully handsome man," she said in a low trembling tone. "And what a daring fellow he is.

I shall have to be careful or I'll fall in love with him if we meet again."

She sat down with a smile lurking about her mouth.

It was not the smile of a woman who fears what the immediate future may bring. It was a smile that bespoke a determination to enjoy Hollywood.

If Richard Courtenay should chose to fall in love with her, that was his affair. And if she should happen to fall in love with him, it was no one else's affair but her own.

Chapter 77

AN ADVENTURE

F COURSE Bar Harbor society was shocked at the double tragedy which sent two of its members to an early grave. Of the two, Vera Browning, the famous actress had been the most popular. Carlton McLain had striven hard to win recognition among the elite of this exclusive summer resort, but his success was meager.

It was generally supposed that he had murdered the actress because she wantonly destroyed his manuscript. Not even the police would accept the theory that he had gone to her home that night for the purpose of robbing her.

The case was considered closed when the coroner rendered a verdict of murder and death by accident. Dr. Pogue, the murdered woman's husband, left Bar Harbor.

Those who knew about his love affair with Olive Bentley in France, expected that she would follow him, but she didn't.

It might be reasonably assumed, however, that a happy sequel of the affair was not far off, for the couple met several times before the physician finally departed.

Guy Fillmore also remained at Bar Harbor. The magnet which held him was pretty Ruth Gordon, and he became a frequent visitor at the Bentley cottage.

Ruth was in a happy frame of mind because she had received permission from her brother to stay another month as the guest of Miss Bentley.

It was not hard for her to forget the part she

played in the double tragedy. Youth forgets unpleasant things easily, and especially when love has come to occupy the mind.

In Olive Bentley, the young Chicago girl had a loyal friend as well as a good mentor. Had Ruth been her own sister, Olive could not have loved her more.

But Ruth was by nature an impulsive creature. She needed someone to hold her in check.

When Miss Bentley undertook this task immediately after Ruth's arrival from Chicago, she realized shortly afterward that it would not be easy.

She realized also that Ruth enjoyed the society of the opposite sex, and could be depended upon to do the unexpected in a crisis. What the young girl needed was the guiding hand of a husband.

Ruth made friends easily. She was very affectionate, and, as was said before, impulsive. When Olive Bentley picked Guy Fillmore as a husband for her, she used rare judgement.

She was afraid, however, that Ruth might spoil her own chances with this very desirable young man by being too willing.

"Don't let him know that you are in love with him every time you meet," she told Ruth. "A little coolness and indifference won't hurt. He'll like you better for it."

And Ruth Gordon, anxious to follow the older woman's advice, proceeded along this theory.

But Guy Fillmore, being desperately in love, did not take kindly to this treatment.

There were frequent lovers' quarrels which always ended in an apology mutually made.

But there was a weightier reason why Miss Bentley was eager to have Ruth settle down and assume the more serious duties of married life. She was well aware of Philip Gordon's domestic difficulties.

She knew also that open enmity existed between Gordon's second wife and his young sister. There was not a finer man in all the world than Phil Gordon, and Olive was ready and anxious to help him.

If Ruth returned to Oak Manor, the domestic peace of the Gordons would be still more disturbed. Poor Phil, already on the brink of despair, should never suffer additional heartaches through his sister's presence in the household.

With Ruth married this could be obviated, and Olive was determined that the affair between the young girl and Guy Fillmore should come to the much desired conclusion.

When Olive coached her youthful protege in the matter of conducting herself when alone with her lover, she failed to curtail Ruth's movements in other directions.

She allowed Ruth the free use of her car, and asked no questions when the girl pulled into the garage occasionally at a rather late hour.

Ruth had a passion for driving. She loved to race through the country lanes and over the highways at a dizzy rate of speed while Olive Bentley received friends or buried her nose in a book.

On this particular night Ruth had again gone out for a drive. She was in a rather desperate mood because of a somewhat bitter quarrel the evening before with Guy Fillmore.

It had ended when she told him that she was tired of his foolish jealousy and that he need not call on her again.

Ruth had proceeded a good deal further out into the country than she usually did. And then suddenly she discovered that she was lost.

She had passed the last sign of human habitation

—an old farmhouse at which she might have paused to ask directions.

But she had preferred to follow her nose. Her nose was, for the most part a perfectly good and beautiful nose, admirably suited for breathing, powdering and other purposes for which feminine noses are provided by providence.

However, it possessed no sense of direction whatever. And that was fatal in this instance.

She stopped abruptly and got out. Standing beside the car she glanced about with considerable apprehension. Which was she to turn to get back to Bar Harbor?

She gave an involuntary shudder, climbed back into the machine and attempted to start the motor.

To her horror she discovered that it would not start. Again and again she tried with the same result. There was a snort and a few puffs, but no power.

"What an awful place to develop engine trouble in," she murmured as she climbed out for the second time. "Good lord, what shall I do? I can't stay here all night. I'd die of fright. Oh, why doesn't some machine come along."

Then, as if the good fairy that had always seen to it that she got what she wanted had summoned it, a car speed toward her. Ruth quickly planted herself in its path.

"Stop!" she cried.

The driver of the car must have seen her, for its pace slackened. Then the engine roared anew and the car, leaping forward, would have run her down had she not swiftly sprung to one side.

The tail light remained visible for a while, and then disappeared.

"Darn him!" Ruth exclaimed. "That was Guy Fillmore. I'd like to wring his neck!"

Of course, he had not recognized her, for if he had, he would have stopped. The average driver alone on the road at night is too wary to stop just because a woman happens to flagg him.

Repeated holdups resulting in the loss of the car and personal violence makes him cautious.

But before Fillmore had gone two miles, his conscience began to bother him. Suppose someone back in that car was really in distress? He snapped off the lights, turned the car around and started back.

And he was cautious, too, for he knew this road and its reputation after dark. He came upon the girl as she was in the act of raising the hood of her machine. Her back was to him and he did not recognize her at once.

Of course, there was no telling how many men might be hidden in this car in distress.

To make sure that no one could surprise him, he whipped out a gun and pointed it straight at the figure fumbling about the engine.

"Put up your hands!" he commanded.

Ruth Gordon whirled about and gave a scream.

At the first glance she saw who it was, and her features grew stern.

"Good gracious!" she snapped. "What do you mean by creeping up on me like that? I had no idea that anybody was around. Why don't you blow your horn?"

The young man came a step closer.

"Good — lord!" he gasped, lowering the gun. "Why, Ruth, it's you!"

"Yes, it's me," she admitted with some sarcasm. "Who did you think it was? And why are you following me, Mr. Fillmore? I thought I told you last night that you were to stay away."

"So you did," he acknowledged. "I did not call at

Miss Bentley's cottage, and that is the only place you mentioned in your decree. This is a public highway and open to anybody."

Ruth Gordon sniffed contemptuously.

"But you followed me just the same," she accused.

"What if I did?" defiantly.

For a space of time they glared at each other. The young man's features had grown a shade paler.

"Well, you can run along," the girl said with cool determination. "I guess I can get this old wagon started without your help. And I can find my way home, too."

"Perhaps, but don't be too sure about that, Ruth. Let me look at your engine." He came forward and made a quick examination. "Why you have burned out your bearings. That was a most careless thing to do. You are stalled for good, believe me."

"But I don't believe you, Mr. Fillmore," she replied. "I told the man to put oil in the engine when I bought gas."

"You got the gas alright, but the man evidently forgot about the oil," he commented. "You couldn't move that car on a bet. The best thing we can do is to push it aside, and you go home with me."

Ruth deliberately turned her back on him.

"I won't do anything of the kind," she declared. "You beat it and I'll wait until somebody going my way comes along."

"You—you couldn't take such a chance," young Fillmore cried, aghast. "Do you realize where you are? This is one of the most dangerous roads in the country. Nothing but bootleggers, hi-jackers and other law-breakers use this road at night. The best thing you can do is to come with me and——"

"What is a hi-jacker?" interrupted Ruth.

"A hi-jacker is a man who robs the bootlegger or

anybody else he may encounter," Fillmore explained. "He specializes on bootleggers mostly, however, and as a matter of persuasion he carries either a sawed-off shotgun or a very good automatic. After he confiscates a cargo of illicit liquor he sells it."

"Oh," exclaimed the girl. "But I need not worry, for I have no whiskey and nothing much of value."

"But you have yourself," Fillmore suggested meaningly.

"I amount to so little," she protested. "Even you let that be known last night."

Guy Fillmore's patience had suddenly come to an end. He dreaded to think what would happen to Ruth if she fell into the hands of the element which infests this road at night. With a grunt he sprang forward.

"You little idiot!" he cried. "You are worse than a five year old baby and you have less sense. You come with me right now."

With that he picked her up bodily and slammed her on the front seat of his car. She struggled for a moment to free herself, but it was of no avail. Way down in her heart she was glad he had done this very thing.

They drove on in silence or about two miles. Then all of a sudden the car stopped.

"What is the matter?" asked Ruth.

"I have not the slightset idea," he replied as he climbed out to investigate. "Everything seems to be alright. I don't see——"

"Gas enough?" suggested the girl.

Fillmore thought he had, but one look at the indicator on the gas tank proved that he had no such thing. It was empty—absolutely empty.

"Who is an idiot now?" she teased.

"Why, I told the garage man to fill this tank," he declared in his confusion and disappointment. "Now we

are in a devil of a fix."

"I should say we are." Ruth agreed heartily. "You carry me off against my will and dump me here. Oh, what a man. I suppose I'll have to hoof it back to Bar Harbor now. What are you going to do?"

There was an expression of utter helplessness in his eyes as he replied:

"I—I don't know, except to find some farmhouse where I might get a hold of some gas. And you better come with me. It'll never do to leave you here alone."

Ruth Gordon was tempted to refuse, but upon second thought she changed her mind.

The immediate surroundings were not entirely conducive to a young woman's mental tranquility. To the right was a dark strip of wood which stretched along the road for a mile or more.

To the left nothing but dense underbrush with nothing but a weed-grown meadow beyond

To be caught there by bootleggers, hi-jackers and other lawbreakers would be a terrible thing.

"Yes, Guy, I am coming with you," she said, a subtle change in her tone and manner.

Side by side they trudged over the country road. Suddenly they spied a light some distance ahead. It came from the window of a house which stood on a lonely spot.

The isolation of the rather dilapidated structure and the reputation this locality bore, urged them to be cautious.

But Guy Fillmore showed no sign of fear. He approached the door and knocked. No response came. Then he kicked it vigorously.

Presently something like a hoarse grunt came from within. That same instant the light was extinguished. Even in the utter darkness Fillmore made out

the brutal features and the leering eyes which appeared in the door suddenly jerked open.

Fillmore looked closely at the man and instantly regretted having brought Ruth with him. This individual before him had every appearance of a criminal. What if this house should happen to be a secret meeting place for men of that type?

He quickly swung the girl behind him and took a step forward. He must have some gas no matter what the cost.

Chapter 78

FORBIDDEN LOVE

ALICE GORDON was seated on the red cement veranda of the "White Lambs Club." She was waiting for Gloria Marsdon who was to come over from the studio and join her for luncheon. She had entirely forgotten that she was the wife of Philip Gordon. She was playing the role of Alice in Wonderland.

A week had passed since her arrival in Hollywood. And what a week it had been. How she had enjoyed the fun, the frivolity, the excitement and the utter freedom.

She had met all sorts of interesting and unusual and famous people, and found them more fascinating than she had dreamed them to be. She had seen the strange, enthralling sights within the vast studios where the pictures she so adored were made.

But it was the people that made Hollywood thrilling. And it was Richard Courtenay who meant Hollywood to her. Nothing else mattered, here or anywhere else.

Ah, how she loved the slurring accent of his voice. How she loved his black eyes with the veiled promise in them. How she loved the stimulant of his flattery. But above all she had come to love the manner of his kisses.

Yes, this handsome screen actor was the type of a man she had dreamed of even as a young girl.

And now she had met him. Ah, that night when they first danced together, and he held her so tenderly, as though she were some precious thing he hardly dared to touch.

Alice sat with both of her hands folded in her lap. The fingers came in contact with something hard.

It was her wedding ring. She began twisting it until it hurt. An ironical smile played about her full red lips.

Love, forbidden and unspeakably sweet, had entered the heart of this married woman.

Already blessed—or cursed—with more than her share of beauty and charm, this new-found love had enhanced those attributes tenfold.

Other women who passed Alice as she sat there lost in pleasant reflections, stared at her with ill-concealed envy.

The men allowed their prolonged gaze to rest upon her with open admiration. Among the entire galaxy of Hollywood beauties there was none who could compare with this woman whom Gloria Marsdon introduced as her friend.

White covered tables stood about. Waiters in white coats hurried hither and thither, carrying covered dishes.

The veranda of the Lambs Club was always a busy place during the luncheon hour. Alice began to wonder if Gloria Marsdon had forgotten the appointment. Perhaps she had been detained at the studio.

Finally the movie actress arrived. She smiled broadly as she saw her friend, and took a seat opposite her.

"Alice," she exclaimed, looking the Chicago woman over critically, "you are simply wonderful to-day. I declare, if you get any prettier, I'll have to send you home."

"Please don't talk so foolish," Alice objected. "Let's talk about something good to eat. I am so hungry I could devour corned beef and cabbage right now

and enjoy it."

"How pleibian," Gloria scoffed. "Who can eat that horrible stuff?"

"You could if you were hungry enough, my dear."

The screen actress laughed softly.

"Well, I am hungry alright," she said, then beckoned to the waiter. "I want creamed chicken with tomatoes and lots of mayonnaise, iced tea and a large portion of ice cream. Of course, I want creamed potatoes also. What'll you have, Alice?"

The latter hesitated a moment, studied the menu card and replied:

"I'll take the same dose, only in larger portions, waiter."

Both women laughed in which the waiter joined.

"Oh, by the way," Gloria Marsdon exclaimed as the white-coated carrier of food and drinks departed, "I have some good news for you."

Alice raised her evebrows.

"Indeed?" she said languidly.

"Yes. Richard Courtenay is coming up to dinner to-night," the other woman chatted on. "He asked me if he might. Of course, I shan't be home. But I imagine you two will find some way of amusing yourselves. You see, I'll have to work late, and I'll get a bite at the studio cafeteria."

"How considerate of you," Alice smiled. "Don't you think it is dangerous for me to be left alone with—with——"

"Oh, nonsense," the screen star interrupted. "Richard is absolutely mad about you. I wish he'd fall in love with me. It would give me a big kick and most likely a broken heart afterward. But dear old Dick adores only beauty, that's why he picked you."

Mrs. Gordon reflected a moment. She made a

weak attempt to uphold the dignity of a married woman by saying:

"But it is all wrong, Gloria. I really can't afford to risk it. I have a husband who is very devoted to me, though I don't love him as I ought. So you see Mr. Courtenay's coming when you are away is all wrong."

"Wrong?" Miss Marsdon repeated. "What is wrong about it? It is the most natural thing in the world. You have been married too long already. You and your husband never really loved each other. The moment I saw you I knew that your married life was not happy.

"When you told me your troubles I felt sorry for you. That is why I persuaded Richard Courtenay to take an interest in you. And you ought to feel flattered that he is doing it.

"Now then," the speaker went on confidentially as she leaned over the table, "I have done my best to make your stay pleasant. Your married life has proved a flat failure and you are wretchedly unhappy. This little affair with Richard is just what you need.

"And why not? You are not hurting anyone. Your husband has made it plain that he does not love you, and that he still clings to the memory of his first wife.

"You are foolish to let a lot of ancient superstitions about fidelity keep you from the romance of life. Faithfulness in your case is not a virtue. It is the curse of the stupid.

"Of course, you will have to keep a cool and steady hand on the reins. Don't let this affair with Courtenay get too serious. There will have to be an end to sooner or later. A little romance like this is the tonic every woman needs. That is the world to-day."

Alice Gordon had suddenly grown very thoughtful and serious.

That was some sermon to which she had just listened. Way down in her tumultuous heart she loved the handsome movie actor well enough to risk anything. What troubled her was the aftermath.

She was unwilling to be one of the many women to whom he had made love. He must promise that she would be the only one henceforth.

"I—I don't quite agree with you, my dear," she said slowly. "I can't risk losing my requtation even for the sake of romance. Besidese, I don't feel inclined just now to——"

The arrival of the waiter with a heavily loaded tray put an end to conversation. And that particular theme was not broached again because every table nearby was being taken.

To discuss Richard Courtenay within the hearing of others was a hazardous undertaking. No one knew this better than Gloria Marsdon.

While they ate they talked about other things. But during it all, Alice was conscious that she was the cynosure of envious as well as admiring eyes.

Ah, how wonderful it would be if she could make Hollywood her permanent home. But how could she with a husband in Chicago? And even if Phil could be persuaded to divorce her, who would purchase for her all the expensive clothes and provide the other luxuries to which she had been born?

True enough, she had a small income of her own through some money left by an uncle whose favorite she had been. But it was fast dwindling down.

Only a few thousand dollars were left, and how long would that last if she was cast adrift by divorce proceedings.

Of course, some day she must inherit all of her father's wealth. But she was by no means sure about

that. The relations between them, always strained, had come dangerously to the breaking point.

Her father loved Philip Gordon almost like a son. In every recent controversy or quarrel he had openly sided with Phil instead of her, his own daughter.

If she gave Phil cause for a divorce her father would surely disown her and will his fortune to some charitable institution.

But there was another and far more important factor to be reckoned with.

There was the secret which involved the mysterious young woman kept prisoner in the tower—a secret she shared with Nora Evans. This made her return to Chicago an absolute necessity.

Only one thing could keep her in Hollywood, and that was the positive assurance from Richard Courtenay that he would make her his wife if she divorced Phil.

He was coming to dinner to-night. Gloria Marsdon was going away, leaving her alone with him. That was the opportunity to put him to the test. What the outcome would be she was afraid to guess.

She loved him — loved him passionately. But would she be strong enough to hold him at bay?

What if he overwhelmed her, hypnotized her with those black eyes of his? Had not Gloria Marsdon told her that no woman could withstand him if he chose to possess her?

But Alice was determined that he should not cross the dead line of intimacy until she was absolutely sure of her ground.

She was rudely disturbed in her train of thought by a harsh laugh coming from the table nearest to them.

As she looked up quickly she caught Gloria Marsdon's eyes. The expression in them seemed to say:

"Keep your ears open and you'll hear something."

Alice glanced over and noticed that three very pretty young women and one man were seated at the table. The man was old and fat and bald, with hideous pouches under his eyes.

He wore a diamond of immense size on his finger, and another on his shirt front.

The impression he made upon Alice was by no means a pleasant one. He reminded her of a well-fed pig. But he must be a man of importance to cause these three pretty young women to fawn upon him as they were obviously doing.

"Who is that old beast?" she asked in a whisper.

"You named him properly," Gloria Marsdon replied guardedly. "But he is the richest man in Hollywood—and the most immoral. Do you notice the swell togs those girls are wearing? Well, he paid for them. He——"

"But who is he and what does he do?" Alice broke in.

"His name is Mark Sperber, and he is the biggest film producer in the country," the movie star told her. "He is the most hated man I know, and twice a movement was started to run him out of Hollywood, but it seems it can't be done. His millions won out each time."

Alice regarded the man with new interest.

She knew his type. And she knew also the type of young women who fall for such as he. Empty-headed, vain creatures they were, with only good looks to recommend them.

"Is he married?" was the next question she asked her companion.

"He's been married three times," Gloria Marsdon answered. "His present wife is traveling abroad. She has been gone over a year. I believe he pays her to stay away from Hollywood, and he enjoys himself in the

meantime with girls like you see with him now. They are all newcomers in Hollywood, and he's got them believing that he can make stars out of them."

For a long moment the two listened intently.

Mark Sperber, his coarse laughter punctuating his remarks, seemed to be having the time of his life. He was telling the pretty blond across the table what to eat in order to gain a little weight.

"Look at Mack Sennett's bathing beauties," he exclaimed. "You don't see any skinny ones among them. A good figure is as essential—in fact more so, than a pretty face."

Alice turned away disgusted.

"That man sickens me," she said rising. "Come, let's go."

They left the veranda quietly and without speaking. At the next corner they parted. Gloria Marsdon was obliged to go back to the studio while Alice proceeded homeward alone.

Although the scene she had witnessed left an unpleasant taste in her mouth, she could not help but think of this multi-millionaire film producer.

Mark Sperber was a repulsive brute of a man, who sought enjoyment in the company of embryo movie actresses. He must be—so she thought—a connoisseur in feminine beauty. And he was no doubt liberal.

Alice had been called the most beautiful woman in Hollywood shortly after her arrival.

She could not recall all the coompliments to which she had listened. Her position was by no means so secure but that it was good policy to add another admirer to her list—especially if that admirer happened to be a man of great wealth. Alice had always desired riches above all things.

Continued in next number

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